



# PRESS RELEASE

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**For Immediate Release**

November 4, 2002

**U.S COAST GUARD MAKES TWO MORE PANAMA EXPRESS  
COCAINE SEIZURES**

U.S. Attorney Paul I. Perez announced today the unsealing of two Indictments upon the arrival in Tampa of fourteen individuals to face federal cocaine smuggling charges. The individuals were detained by the United States Coast Guard on two separate maritime interdictions in the Eastern Pacific last week. On October 25, 2002 in international waters off the coast of Guatemala in the Eastern Pacific ocean the Coast Guard detained ten individuals aboard the Guatemalan fishing vessel, "Martita Lau". The individuals aboard the F/V Martita Lau were observed throwing over one hundred bales of cocaine, weighing in excess of three tons, overboard as the Coast Guard approached the vessel. The defendants are charged with conspiring to possess with intent to distribute over five kilograms of cocaine while aboard the F/V Martita Lau, as well as possession with intent to distribute the cocaine while aboard the vessel. The charges carry a potential sentence, if convicted, ranging from ten years' to life imprisonment.

The United States Coast Guard also apprehended a recreational “go-fast” vessel in international waters off the coast of Colombia on October 29, 2002 when bales of cocaine were observed on board. The go- fast crew of four Colombians set the vessel on fire and abandoned the vessel as the Coast Guard approached. The Coast Guard was able to put out the fire and recover in excess of two tons of cocaine from the go-fast. The crews from both vessels will be prosecuted in accordance with United States law and the detainees were transported to Tampa, Florida for prosecution.

These seizure mark the latest interdictions of drugs on the high seas related to the Tampa-based investigation, Operation Panama Express which has totaled over one hundred and forty tons of cocaine. United States Attorney Paul I. Perez remarked: “We continue to work with the United States Coast Guard in this maritime interdiction effort in the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean. Their efforts continue to have both an immediate and long-term impact on major cocaine trafficking organizations.” Participating in the joint investigation dubbed, Operation Panama Express, are: The United States Coast Guard (USCG), Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), U.S. Customs Service (USCS) and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The cases are being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Erick Matheney and A. Lee Bentley III of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force for the Middle District of Florida.

An indictment is merely a formal charge that a defendant has committed a violation of the federal criminal laws, and every defendant is presumed innocent unless, and until, proven guilty.